

Vicarious Pain and Genuine Pleasure: Some reflections on spectator transformation of meaning in sport

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Sport, competitive or recreational, is an activity that frequently involves some amount of pain. That pain can be given a wide variety of meanings and interpretations, depending not only on physiological circumstances but, amongst other things, context and the relationship between athlete and spectator. Thus, pain is equivocal in meaning for the athlete in whom it occurs, and between athlete and observer.

These claims are not at all remarkable. However, on the basis of these ordinary observations, I want to present a case for three further claims: 1) That the addition of spectators to sport, not simply as knowledgeable observers, but as what I shall refer to as interested participants or as devoted fans, as a decisive presence in the sport situation shifts control of meaning from the athlete to the spectator as consumer of athletic performance—in effect, it is not the athlete who gets to say what the significance of pain is but the spectator; 2) moreover, that this shift in the control of meaning permits spectator demand for entertainment that incorporates and valorises the athlete experience of pain, and 3) that the spectator attitudes that create this demand for the suffering of others are, as vicarious and self-alienated, at least inauthentic, perhaps depraved.

I should also say at the outset that this paper is largely speculative in the sense

that I am attempting to construct an interpretation of interpretation that makes sense of what appear to be conflicting meanings of pain and sport, rather than offering a strict and analytical demonstration. In that spirit, my discussion should be taken as provisional rather than definitive.¹

1. ***“Good Pain”***

As suggested, the athlete experience of pain already incorporates some familiar ambiguities, many of which are relatively benign. One frequently experiences what is referred to as “good pain”: the feeling of being stretched to one’s physical limit, of being utterly exhausted after an extra demanding training session or game, or the intense body-ache that sets in a day or two after extreme exertion. And it is not unheard-of for an athlete to savour wearing the badge of a “good bruise.” In such cases, it’s not the *sensation* that is good, but what the sensation *signifies*, which is a kind of kinesthetic success. None of these kinds of pain need represent negative outcomes of athletic activity. Indeed just the opposite, although they may also be the sort of sensations that discourage the inveterate couch potato from de-couching—until he or she, too, can re-learn the significations of these sensations, until they mean something else to him or her as well. The mutable nature of these sorts of experience can also be seen in the way that one’s body aches more after a defeat than a victory. The physical (organic) impact on the tissues may be no different in the two cases, but the meaning of those aches is.

One of the essential skills an athlete must acquire, along with the movements and strategies of his or her particular sport, is the ability to interpret discomfort and painful sensations; to be able to locate their sources and occasions, and what they mean in two ways: what they indicate about physical processes and what broader meaning ought to be placed upon them. The athlete has to be able to distinguish between “good pain,” pain that is “only pain,” and pain that signals incipient or actual injury. Pain may indicate that unused muscles are being worked (the right ones at last, perhaps), or it may mean that technique is flawed and must be corrected. Pain may be a friendly indicator of the need for rest, or it may be something that must be fought through.² By and large, however, depending on the sport in question, and supposing an otherwise fit and competent athlete, pain falls into one of two meaning categories: (1) an affirmation of competitive intensity, or (2) an indicator of destructive events, either (a) technical failure or (b) injury. (2a) can, of course, shade into (2b), but (1) and (2) may also overlap.

In general, I think it reasonably safe to say that the athlete experience of pain tends to fall into the second category: most people do not enjoy pain and athletes, while their perceptions regarding pain may be somewhat nonstandard, are no exception. Pain is an indicator that something is not as it ought to be.

For the external observer, pain also has a variety of meanings, some positive and some negative, and sometimes both at once. These valuations are distinct from those the athlete encounters subjectively, unless and until the athlete takes on these

external meanings as his or her own. Thus, the observer and the athlete may both think of pain as something that must be ignored, not felt, or at least not given in to. Though, as I shall argue in due course, while the athlete may have good reason not to feel pain, the observer may prefer that there be pain experienced by at least some competitors.

There is a point of potential contradiction here. Both perspectives have an interest in pain, but so long as one is not collapsed into the other, pain has different meanings for them. For the athlete, pain is an index of maximum effort *and* of technical failure (as a limit of exertion); the trick is to know where the line falls between them, and to stay on the positive side of that line. For the observer as spectator, the athlete's pain is an assurance that he is getting a good show; it adds to the entertainment value because it indicates maximum effort on the part of the participants, because it "ups the stakes," and perhaps adds to the moral allegory played out in the sport contest. Although it is clear that spectators expect athletes to "rise above" the destructive pain they experience, there is little reason to believe that players in pain really do perform better. This suggests that this particular spectator demand may have little to do with an enthusiasm for *athletic* excellence rather than the need to have some other set of meanings satisfied.

It may be worth remembering that by no means all or even a majority of the sports contests that take place have spectators, and for a great many of those that do those spectators may or may not even be paying much attention. In these cases, the

significance of pain remains largely athlete-defined (within the familiar limits of peer and familial pressures and cultural norms).

Spectators alter the meaning of athletic contests and the meaning of the various elements of athlete experience of those contests. And this happens in a relatively simple way, though the effects of this shift are complex. The goal of the contest stays the same; games are played because they are *fun*; they are entertainment. What changes is not this goal, but who is supposed to have that goal met. That is, once a sport has become a spectator event, whether the athletes have fun is irrelevant; it's the fans' entertainment that counts. And their fun may well be increased by the pain that the contest inflicts upon the players. Spectator sport is *for the spectators* above all.³

2. *The Spectator and Narrative*

"The spectator" is not a simple category. We need to distinguish three basic levels of spectatorship, while bearing in mind that these are not hard distinctions—there can be a fair amount of overlap or slide between them. These are: (1) the knowledgeable observer, (2) the interested participant, and (3) the devoted fan.

The knowledgeable observer is the *connaisseur* of athletic performance, one who pursues a disinterested appreciation for the activity of sport. "Disinterested" here does not mean "unenthusiastic" (it is not aesthetic *ennui*) but it indicates that

the observer does not insert herself into the activity pursued by the participant—she watches, enjoys, understands (perhaps through shared experience), finds some meaning of her own in the performance possibly, but is content for the performers to determine what they do and why. She need not be completely nonpartisan, but she is separate from the contest, even if it is her favourite pastime to attend and watch. In many ways, the knowledgeable observer represents a kind of philosophical ideal of spectatorship, and this may be why there is so little to say about it. It is essentially an aesthetic attitude and I shall have more to say about the comparison of sport spectatorship and art appreciation near the end of this paper.

With the second level, the interested participant, and the third, the devoted fan, we are dealing with a more genuine and familiar spectatorship. Now we are faced with the transformation of sport from subjective athletic process to objectively available product: the show. The observer is now effectively a participant in the sporting event.

In analysing spectatorship and the effect it has on the transformation of meaning in sport, we need to examine several key elements. These are narrative, participation, and substitution; also vital in understanding these is the role of witnessing, since contemporary spectator participation is primarily through an often especially active witnessing.

For the directly participating athlete, the understanding of the activity performed is a body-understanding, an immediate lived awareness. For the

knowledgeable observer, there may be a similar second-hand understanding of the activity; she is not having the same experience, or the same kind of experience, as the athlete, but her awareness of the activity may be informed by her own similar movements under similar circumstances. Or understanding may be mediated by the personal insofar as it is a parent watching their child, or a partner or close friend. In these cases, although awareness is reflectively separated from the action, we can admit that there is a legitimately subjective connection to what is enacted, albeit mediate rather than immediate.

At the level of spectatorship, the body-understanding fades out of importance in favour of a narrative understanding. What organises the spectator's experience of the event is less the shared body than the shared story. In fact, the body in the personal sense of the lived awareness of *this* athlete or player matters less than the story-role filled by that individual: anyone will do in that role so long as he or she can fill the required characterisation. Personal quirks do not matter except insofar as the character in the story is expected to have quirks. The narrative significance of the individual and of the contest is of more importance than who it is in a concretely personal sense in whom the narrative is realised.

The knowledgeable observer does not participate in the contest. The spectator does, and because of that the event is altered: its function is to generate meaning of a different kind. The spectator is a participant in a narrative reconstruction of what the athlete does, which may help to explain why it is that

spectators think that they are part of the game even though they have no comparable experience to that of the players. Where the demands of the sport itself are paramount (as in sports like rowing which, the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race aside, have no broad spectator appeal whatsoever), this may have minimal effect on the athletes; at the more developed reaches of professional sport, the athlete ends up existing for the sake of the narrative game.⁴

There are some particularly forceful manifestations of this throughout the history of sport and games. For example, Roman spectacle, even when it did not indulge in explicit narrative, as in the scripting of executions or gladiatorial combats as re-enactments of mythological or historical events, presented its entertainments within the context of a story about law and the pollution presented by the criminal. The *noxii* are destroyed in the arena as a re-telling of the story of justice and to restore the sanctity of ordered civil existence. The spectator is a participant in this cleansing of Rome first and foremost by being witness to the meting out of just retribution on the bodies of the condemned, and only secondarily by calling for more violent or inventive techniques of execution (Kyle (1998), ch. 3).

Ritual combat remained in the medieval period as a means of restoring the balance of justice. Again, while justice is done by the combattants, it is seen to be done by the onlookers to the combat. Michel Foucault (1977) has given us a highly persuasive account of the role of public torture and execution as the direct manifestation of the ruler's power, but of course as such it too requires an

audience—such spectacles are a part of the ritual re-enactment of a narrative of power, requiring the presence and participation of spectators as witnesses, who *by witnessing* reaffirm the relevant tale, who make it real, yet again.

Now, what narrative do modern spectator sports tell? On the face of it, the story would appear to be about the triumph of excellence, and the spectators are there to witness to the excellence achieved through the contest.⁵ Alas, this is much too simple. It does not take much looking to discover that a large proportion of the spectating public is much more interested in victory than in excellence, to the extent that victory with excellence is just a bonus and excellence without victory is unacceptable. Indeed, many spectators do not distinguish the two: the best team is the one with the most wins—end of story.⁶

It is tempting to claim that this view is the result of an unsophisticated attitude about the meaning of sport, but in fact I want to argue that it is just the opposite. It is the reflection of the investment of interest that the spectator makes in the contest.

The athlete or player functions for the spectator as a representative, but a representative of *what* depends on the narrative played out by the contest.⁷ Thus, for the Roman citizen, the victims destroyed in the arena represented crime, sacrilege, and pollution, cleansed from the state through the ritualised slaughter of the games. Successful gladiators, much as they may have had their “fans”, were in no way heroic surrogates, but examples of how even the despised and condemned could meet inevitable death with courage and discipline under the direction of Rome.⁸

When we look at more modern sporting images, we can still find examples of the vilified, but more likely the celebrated. Modern spectator sports give us the sports hero, but this has its variations. Sometimes, athletes represent certain kinds of athletic ideals: sportsmanship, perseverance, skill, speed, strength, agility, ferocity, craftiness, etc. These are the characteristics that may well appeal to the knowledgeable observer.

This representative role takes on more import once the athlete or team is seen not simply as a worthy example of a strictly athletic quality, but as the embodiment of a more moral or civic mission—the champion of some local or abstract cause. This was the situation of the hopeless *damnati* of the ancient arena; it is also frequently the situation of the modern professional or Olympic athlete. For the interested participant (the second level of spectatorship set out earlier), the outcome of the contest matters because it is the triumph of good over evil, free enterprise over communism, or simply how we do things over how they do things. This is where the sports contest becomes a kind of passion play; the competitors take on the roles of grand moral principles fighting for supremacy, like Marduk and Tiamat, or Superman and Lex Luthor. Without the spectator, the outcome rarely has these dimensions—unwitnessed or unrecounted, it could never have this significance.

Spectatorship transforms the athlete into a symbolic being, rather than a highly accomplished but otherwise regular human person. At the initial level (the knowledgeable observer), the locus of meaning remains the athlete herself, as the

particular concrete individual she is. Yes, we can learn generalisable things from her given concrete subjective experience, but her experience remains her own. At the second level, where spectatorship as such becomes a formative concern, the player's own subjectivity becomes increasingly insignificant except as something that can be made objectively accessible. It cannot be private or unique; it must be interpreted in terms of culturally normative tropes, expressible as an instantiation not of separateness but of a symbolic struggle in which the spectators can see the representation of their own real or imagined contests. Thus, the importance of the publicly accessible drama of the athlete who fights through a devastating injury (Silken Laumann in rowing) or overwhelming cancer (cycling's Lance Armstrong), or personal grief, or poverty, or some other hardship, to win an Olympic medal, the Tour de France, or just the local swim meet.

In this context, the athlete becomes the people's champion, the one who fights the good fight for them, in place of them. Given the stakes, make-believe is not enough; the battle must be (what passes for) real. And so the pain must be real. The spectator must be convinced that there truly is the possibility of deliverance and redemption, and his champion must therefore undergo the purifying fire of combat not just figuratively but in the flesh, as the incarnation of the spectator's most profound hope for ultimate victory and reward.⁹

I am using deliberately religious language here because the way in which the spectator projects onto the athlete or team his fears and hopes, hatreds and loves, is

the same kind of substitution that is called forth and enacted by religious rituals. The athlete/team is, like the scapegoat or the lamb, the symbolic substitute, a vessel for the spectator's own set of meanings.

So if the player scores the winning goal with a broken leg or a grade two concussion, it just goes to show how good really does triumph over evil, or that finesse wins over thuggery—or the reverse: “heart” wins over mechanical discipline, and so on. The fact that the same events can be interpreted either way depending on the chosen narrative, underscores both the centrality of the narrative aspect of spectator devotion to sport and the relative unimportance of the actuality of the principals in the contest; that the facts and events be amenable to narrative interpretation is what counts.

The athlete/player endures pain not for his or her own sake, but for the sake of the spectator. And the greater the pain, the greater the victory, despite the fact that peak performance requires a healthy and fit body, not one held together with pharmaceuticals and trainer's tape. Pain may make for a good show, but not necessarily athletic excellence.

3. *Fandom*

Pain, then, has a vicarious significance for the passionately interested spectator, but this significance receives an additional layer once we get to our third level of spectatorship, the devoted fan. Here, substitution is more complete: I am my

team, we win or lose. Once the game is about *me*, the mythic, allegorical description of the event acquires a life-or-death quality. For my team to lose is for me to endure a blow to my own ego. For me to be good my team has to be good. This is not just about individuals, of course, but collectivities—city X is crap because its sports teams are crap.¹⁰ Everything previously said about the symbolic meaning of the contest for the interested spectator holds here, though at a heightened pitch. But what I want to draw attention to here is what happens to the interpretation of pain, because it helps to underline the disturbing inauthenticity of this existential position, which we might otherwise be inclined to shrug off as stupid but basically harmless.

By tagging his or her own identity on to his team or the star player, the fan gains certain emotional permissions without having to bear the physiological cost associated with acting on those emotions. (I am leaving out of account fans who cross over the line into hooliganism.) In particular, he gets to indulge in the highly satisfying feeling of righteous outrage over fouls and injuries committed against “his” player, and of justice rightly done when retribution is returned on others, and all without the real cost of bruises, hospitalisation, suspension from employment, etc. It is the heightened moments of emotional involvement in the event, especially those involving the socially risky emotions of rage, anger, and hatred, that bond the fan to his team, that allow him to feel as if he is part of the team.

This may be a reason why a league like the NHL will not make more than token efforts to eliminate violence from the game: it’s an essential component of (a certain

kind of) fan-involvement (and fans who identify strongly with “their” team tend to buy lots of merchandise). Thus, there is not only an expectation that players will get hurt, but it is a positive attraction for the fan, an opportunity to share vicariously in his team’s or favourite player’s experience. It reminds the fan that the game is not just fantasy, but real. Hence, it must indeed be real blood that is shed.¹¹

The possibly cynical motives of sports league management aside, what player pain means for the devoted fan is more than simple entertainment, though it is clear that bloodshed for the hockey fan as for the Roman citizen makes for a good show. Real damage inflicted upon competitors in a contest is what the fan needs to feel a part of something larger than his own life, more significant, more meaningful—the fan has chosen to see his own life as lacking in meaning compared with the life of his team, the competitors in his favourite sport. Thus, to gain significance again for his life he must attach himself to the team, live vicariously through it, borrow its meaning for himself. The devoted fan is the embodiment of alienated meaning.

The fan also convinces himself that he feels as “his” players feel—he endures the “same” humiliation of defeat and joy of victory, he “feels” their pain. And herein lies one of the most dangerous fallacies of fandom. It is difficult for the fan to see a problem with his demand for sacrifice because he has convinced himself that he feels as the competitors do, and yet, of course, he does not and can not. He feels perhaps a sympathetic flexing of muscles and sway of the body as he follows the player on the big screen or down there on the field, but he is not performing (and likely could not

perform) those enormously physiologically taxing actions that his body mimics in miniature. He experiences the thrill of seeing and hearing that crushing tackle or bodycheck, but he does not and cannot sense the pain and disorientation that the tackle or check causes to the player. His delirium at winning the Cup is in reality his *own* happiness that his vicarious association with the team affirms him as worthier than that bunch of “losers” who supported the other teams, but cannot be seriously comparable to that of the committed, self-confident, and skilled athletes who have endured the (real) pain and delivered the victory. All the spectator did to secure the win, after all, was to buy a ticket, sit in the stands, paint his face perhaps, and yell his head off.

This brings us to a remark offered by Alan Guttman (1986, 147) to the effect that we don’t normally denounce museum goers for not painting or concert goers for not composing symphonies, but it is a commonplace to criticise spectators for watching rather than doing sports. “Supporters of the arts”, it might be argued, are no more artistic than sports fans are athletic (perhaps less so), but the former are congratulated and the latter are mocked. This seems like an inconsistency since both art and sport can be understood as a kind of aestheticism. And there are spectacles that clearly bridge both fields, the Cirque du Soleil being a particularly strong example, but so is classical or modern dance. The recurring arguments over the “sportness” of figure-skating and gymnastics suggest, however, that not everyone is comfortable with this parallel, especially those (typically, fans) who are convinced that sport

requires clear winners and losers, rather than skill and athletic excellence.

Of course, the art-sport analogy breaks down on the matter of competition.

One might experience the sublime listening to Bach or watching Arsenal versus Manchester United, but one doesn't *root for* Yo Yo Ma, want him to kick Janos Starker's butt, as it were. Yes, there are competitive modes in some musical forms, but the point is to produce the sublime through this competition, not to *win*. The devoted fan who cannot be happy unless his team wins is not willing to experience the sublime in human athletic achievement if it is produced by the opposing team; his aesthetic commitment is to the reiteration of his vicariously generated superiority over other human beings. His ability to experience the aesthetic on one level is stunted by his commitment to another, a commitment driven by the stake he has placed in the event for his own personal validation. Fandom is fundamentally an existential commitment, an inauthentic one insofar as it is a decision to define oneself in terms of another's identity (an identity manufactured for or by the fan), to seek the meaning of one's life in the actions of others.

To put this situation in Kierkegaardian terms, the fan foregoes the reflective aestheticism that the knowledgeable observer experiences in favour of immediate feeling, in a supposed emulation of the athlete's existence. However, there is an essential double falsity to this move. In the first place, it should perhaps be noted that athletes only occasionally achieve moments of immediate existence, though it is what they (reflectively) strive for, through a careful control of the self and of the unfolding

of one's own role in events. But the fan seeks out and throws himself into a fantastic immediacy of devotion and ecstatic enthusiasm, avoiding the task of direct self-definition. Moreover, this is an immediacy derived second-hand. The commonplace charge of parasitism is correct: the fan does not generate the object of his aesthetic experience. But Guttman's point is apposite; the experience the fan indulges in *is* comparable to the experience of aesthetic abandonment in music. The difference, however, is twofold. As suggested above, the listener does not often confuse herself with the composer or take sides against other composers.¹² The crucial point here, however, is that no one has to get beaten up to produce a profound and moving musical performance. Granted, musicians may experience repetitive stress injuries and the like, but abuse of the performers does not feature *as a central part of the entertainment*.

In conclusion, then, the devoted sports fan buys, not just his entertainment, but his existential validation at the cost of another's suffering. If anything counts as depraved, this would have to come close to fitting the description. I do not think that it follows from all this that we must put an end to spectator sports. But it does argue the importance of analysing our forms of entertainment and determining what it is that we find entertaining and why, as well as what cost we place upon those who entertain us, to do so.

Notes

1. In the following I will most frequently refer to players and games; however, it should be understood that I intend to include non-team sports and events that are not strictly games, e.g., track and field.
2. See Heil and Fine (1999), 18.
3. Thus I will be arguing quite a different point than someone like Lasch (1988), who decries the “degradation” of sport that is the result of a lack of knowledge on the part of spectators and the media’s playing to the lowest common denominator; he rejects both the “entertainment ethic” and the reverse tendency toward the valorisation of noncompetitive amateurism. I happen to be sympathetic to these two complaints, but my own criticism is quite different: sport and spectator sport are distinct beasts, and unlike Lasch, I intend to argue that the latter degrades both athlete and spectator.
4. In the modern era, this transformation is largely performed for the spectator by the media, especially network television—a subject much too large to be explored here. However, it is important to note that this narrative function of sport predates the twentieth century media takeover of sport, as the following paragraphs indicate.
5. See, for example, Lasch (1988), 404-6, and Hemphill’s discussion of this (1995), 52.
6. See, for example, Jones (2003), 46, who argues that the loyalty of the traditional fan is not to “standards of excellence in sport”, nor even to *football* (or *hockey*), but to “an emblem or an institution first and foremost.”
7. Guttmann uses the term “representational sport”, but I shall be making a more detailed use of the concept of representation.
8. See Kyle’s detailed and fascinating discussion, especially Chapters 2, 3, and 7.
9. For all of its excess, it is this operatic quality of spectator sports that professional wrestling has latched on to and made explicit. Pro wrestling is dismissed as a sport for two reasons: its over-the-top histrionics and its contrived contests. Though things can and do go wrong (outside the script), the pain and suffering are transparently fake. For the passion play to really work, the pain must be real.
10. The reader can easily fill in the names of his or her own sports bêtes-noirs. See Guttman (1986), 182.

11. The Todd Bertuzzi incident during the 2003-4 National Hockey League season is the most current example. A questionable but not extraordinary hit on the Vancouver Canucks' captain Markus Naslund by Colorado Avalanche player Steve Moore during a game in Denver excited much anger and calls for revenge on the part of Vancouver players and staff. Anticipation was high for payback in advance of the return engagement in Vancouver and the fans were not disappointed. During the second period of play Bertuzzi skated up behind Moore, grabbing his jersey with one hand and reaching around from behind with the other to punch Moore in the face. Both players fell to the ice, Bertuzzi on top, slamming Moore's head onto the ice. The result was a concussion, broken jaw, and two broken cervical vertebrae for the Colorado player and eventually a season ending suspension for Bertuzzi. Vancouver fans were outraged that Bertuzzi would miss the playoffs and the NHL (apparently) that the only coverage the League gets on American television networks is of these sorts of incidents. But everyone was talking hockey.

12. There are, admittedly, exceptions, especially in popular music, where fandom parallel to that in sport arises, e.g., "Dead Heads."

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